

# The Road To Mecca

مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ

By Muhammad Asad

Edited By The Vista

IslamLand 



# Leopold Weiss

*Adapted from*

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As a child, Leopold Weiss received a thorough grounding in Hebrew religious lore. At his father's insistence, he spent long hours poring over the sacred scriptures, and by the age of thirteen he could read and speak Hebrew with great fluency. He studied the Old Testament – the *Mishna* and *Gemara* – in its original form and became knowledgeable with the text and commentaries of the Talmud. He then immersed himself in the intricacies of Biblical exegesis, called *Targum*, just as if he had been destined for a rabbinical career.

The dream of his grandfather, an orthodox rabbi from a long line of orthodox rabbis, was to have one of his descendants join the rabbinical tradition. However, this dream would not be fulfilled in Leopold Weiss, for in spite of all his budding religious wisdom – or maybe because of it – he soon developed a supercilious feeling towards many of the premises of the Jewish faith. It seemed strange to him that God would be preoccupied with the destinies of one particular nation, the Hebrews, which tended to make God appear not as the creator and sustainer of all mankind, but rather as a tribal deity adjusting all creation to the requirements of a 'chosen people'.

His disappointment with the Jewish faith did not lead him at that time to search for spiritual truths elsewhere. Under the influence of an agnostic environment, he drifted, like so many boys of his age, into a dispassionate rejection of all institutional religion. What he was looking forward to was not much different from the expectations of most other boys: action, adventure, excitement.

During this period in his life, World War One broke out. After the war came to an end, Leopold Weiss spent about two years studying, in a somewhat desultory fashion, the history of art and philosophy at the University of Vienna. However his heart was not in those studies. He felt a yearning to come into more intimate grips with life. He wanted to find by himself an approach to the spiritual order of things which he knew must exist but which he could not yet discern.

The opening decades of the twentieth century stood in the sign of a spiritual vacuum. All of Europe's ethical valuations had become amorphous under the terrible impact of what had happened during World War One, and no new set of values was anywhere in sight. A feeling of brittleness and insecurity was in the air – a presentiment of social and intellectual upheavals that made one doubt whether there could ever again be any permanency in man's thoughts and endeavors. Everything seemed to be flowing in a formless flood, and the spiritual restlessness of

youth could nowhere find a foothold. In the absence of any reliable standards of morality, nobody could give the young people satisfactory answers to the many questions that perplexed them.

The conclusions of psychoanalysis, to which Leopold Weiss was introduced in those days of youthful perplexity, was at that time an intellectual revolution of the first magnitude. One felt in one's bones that this flinging-open of new, hitherto barred doors of cognition was bound to affect deeply – and perhaps change entirely – man's thinking about himself. The discovery of the role which unconscious urges play in the formation of the human personality opened avenues to a more penetrating self-understanding. Many were the evenings that Leopold spent in Vienna's cafés listening to exciting discussions between some of the early pioneers of psychoanalysis, such as Alfred Adler, Hermann Steckl and Otto Gross.

Leopold was, however, disturbed by the intellectual arrogance of the new science which tried to reduce all mysteries of man's self to a series of neurogenetic reactions.

His restlessness grew and made it increasingly difficult for him to pursue his university studies. At last he decided to give them up for good and to try his hand at journalism.

His first chance at success in this new field was with the news agency United Telegraph where he landed a job as a telephonist and soon thereafter became a reporter. Owing to his knowledge of languages, he quickly rose to the position of sub-editor in charge of the news service for the Scandinavian press. He was only twenty-two years old. Work at the United Telegraph seemed to open for him many avenues into the broader world. The Café des Wetens and the Romanisches Café – meeting places of the most outstanding writers, artists, journalists, actors, and producers of the day – represented something like an intellectual home to him. He stood on friendly and sometimes even familiar terms with many of them.

He was happy enough in his professional success, but deeply dissatisfied, not knowing what he was really after. He was like many young people of his generation, for while none of them was really unhappy, only a very few seemed to be consciously happy.

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In the summer of 1922, while he was still twenty-two years old, he set out on a journey to Jerusalem. If anyone told him at that time that his first acquaintance with the world of Islam would be a turning point in his life, he would have laughed off the idea as utterly preposterous. It was

not that he was impervious to the allure of countries associated in his mind – as in the minds of most Europeans – with the romantic atmosphere of the Arabian Nights, but it never occurred to him to anticipate adventures in the realm of the spirit.

All the idea and impressions that had previously come his way he had instinctively related to the Western world-view, hoping to attain to a broader reach of feeling and perception within the only cultural environment known to him. He was a very young European, brought up in the belief that Islam and all it stood for was no more than a romantic by-path of man's history, not even quite 'respectable' from the spiritual and ethical points of view, and therefore not to be mentioned in the same breath, still less to be compared, with the only two faiths which the West considers fit to be taken seriously: Christianity and Judaism. His thinking was bound to the European bias against things Islamic. He would later say about himself: "If, in fairness to myself, I cannot say that I was self-absorbed in an individual sense, I was none the less, without knowing it, deeply enmeshed in that self-absorbed, culturally egocentric mentality so characteristic of the West at all times."

Nevertheless, after four years, he would give the testimony of faith that "there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah" and go by the name Muhammad Asad.

Though his life had been full of adventures, surprises, and coincidences, his acceptance of Islam was a result of none of these. Instead, it came as a result of years of traveling throughout the Muslim world, living among its various peoples, immersing himself in its culture, and reading extensively its literary heritage in both Arabic and Persian.

In his early years, he had become disillusioned with the Jewish faith, the religion of his ancestors. He had given some thought to Christianity and found that the Christian concept of God was infinitely superior to that of the Old Testament in that it did not restrict God's concern to any one group of people but postulated His Fatherhood of all mankind. There was, however, an element in the Christian religious view that detracted from the universality of its approach: the distinction it made between the soul and the body, the world of faith and the world of practical affairs.

Owing to its early divorce from all tendencies aiming at an affirmation of life and of worldly endeavors, Christianity, he felt, had long ceased to be a moral impetus to Western civilization. The age-old attitude of a Church which, in pursuance of the principle of a division between 'that which is God's and that which is Caesar's', had left the entire field of social and economic activities almost untouched – with the result that Christian politics and business had developed in a direction entirely



different from all that Christ had envisioned.

The cardinal task of any religion was to show man not merely how to *feel* but also how to *live* rightly. With an instinctive feeling of having been somehow let down by his religion, Western man had, over the centuries, lost all his real faith in Christianity; with the loss of this faith, he had lost the conviction that the universe was an expression of one Planning Mind and thus formed an organic whole; and because he had lost this conviction, he was now living in a spiritual and moral vacuum.

Leopold's youthful conviction that 'man does not live by bread alone' crystallized into the intellectual conviction that the current adoration of 'progress' was no more than a weak, shadowy substitute for an earlier faith in absolute values – a pseudo-faith devised by people who were now deluding themselves with the belief that somehow, by mere evolutionary impulse, man would outgrow his present difficulties. Leopold did not see how any of the new economic systems that stemmed from this illusory faith could possibly constitute more than a palliative for Western society's misery: they could, at best, cure some of its symptoms, but never the cause.

Leopold's first exposure to Islam occurred during his initial trip to Jerusalem when he witnessed a group of people praying in congregation. It somehow disturbed him to see so real a prayer combined with almost mechanical body movements, and one day he asked the *imâm*, who understood a little English: "Do you really believe that God expects you to show Him your respect by repeated bowing and kneeling and prostration? Might it not be only to look into oneself and to pray to Him in the stillness of one's heart? Why all these movements of your body?"

He replied: "How else then should we worship God? Did he not create both, soul and body, together? And this being so, should man not pray with his body as well as his soul?" He then went on to explain the significance of the various movements of the prayer.

This was an important moment in Leopold's life, since he would one day observe: "Years later, I realized that with his simple explanation the *hajji* had opened to me the first door to Islam."

A few months later, Leopold visited the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. He described what he saw in the following way: "In long, even rows stood many hundreds of men behind the *imam* who led the prayer; they bowed, knelt, touched the ground with their foreheads, and rose again: all in disciplined unison, like soldiers. It was very quiet; while the congregation was standing, one could hear the voice of the old *imam* from the distant depths of the huge hall, reciting verses from the Qur'ân; and when he bowed or prostrated himself, the entire congregation

followed him as one man, bowing and prostrating themselves before God as if He were present before their eyes...

“It was at this moment that I became aware how near their God and their faith were to these people. Their prayer did not seem to be divorced from their working day; it was part of it – not meant to help them forget life, but to remember it better by remembering God.”

As he was leaving the mosque on that day, he turned to the man who was his friend and host and said: “How strange and wonderful that you people feel God to be so close to you. I wish I could feel so myself.”

His friend replied: “How else could it be, O my brother? Is not God, as our Holy Book says, *nearer to thee than the vein in thy neck?*”

He would later say the following about his first trip to the Middle East: “Those fateful months of my first sojourn among the Arabs set in motion a whole train of impressions and reflections; some inarticulate hopes of a personal nature demanded to be admitted to my consciousness. I had come face to face with a life-sense that was entirely new to me. A warm, human breath seemed to flow out of these people’s blood into their thoughts and gestures, with none of those painful cleavages of the spirit, those phantoms of fear, greed and inhibition that made European life so ugly and of so little promise.

“In time it became more important to me to grasp the spirit of these Muslim people: not because their religion attracted me (for at that time I knew very little about it), but because I recognized in them that organic coherence of the mind and the senses which we Europeans had lost. Might it not be possible, perhaps, by better understanding the life of the Arabs to discover the hidden link between our Western suffering – the corroding lack of inner integration – and the roots of that suffering? To find out, perhaps, what it was that made us Westerners run away from that solemn freedom of life which the Arabs seemed to possess, even in their social and political decay?

“And what at first had been hardly more than a sympathy for the political aims of the Arabs, the outward appearance of Arabian life and the emotional security I perceived in its people, imperceptibly changed into something resembling a personal quest. I became increasingly aware of an absorbing desire to know what it was that lay at the root of this emotional security and made Arab life so different from the European: and that desire seemed to be mysteriously bound up with my own innermost problems. I began to look for openings that would give me a better insight into the character of the Arabs, into the ideas that had shaped them and made them spiritually so different from the Europeans. I began to read intensively about their history, culture and religion. And in

the urge I felt to discover what it was that moved their hearts and filled their minds and gave them direction, I seemed to sense an urge to discover some hidden forces that moved myself, and filled me, and promised to give me direction...”

He had spent much of his time in Damascus reading all manner of books on Islam. His Arabic, although sufficient for conversation, was as yet too weak for reading the Qur’ân in the original, and so he had to take recourse to translations. For the rest, he had to rely on European orientalist works and on his friend’s explanations.

However fragmentary, these studies and talks were like the lifting of a curtain. He began to discern a world of ideas of which hitherto he had been entirely ignorant.

Islam did not seem to be so much a religion in the popular sense of the word as, rather, a way of life; not so much a system of theology as a programme of personal and social behavior based on the consciousness of God. Nowhere in the Qur’ân could he find any reference to a need for ‘salvation’. No original, inherited sin stood between the individual and his destiny – for, *nothing shall be attributed to man but what he himself has striven for*. No asceticism was required to open a hidden gate to purity: for purity was man’s birthright, and sin meant no more than a lapse from the innate, positive qualities with which God was said to have endowed every human being. There was no trace of any dualism in the consideration of man’s nature: body and soul seemed to be taken as one integral whole.

At first he had been somewhat startled by the Qur’ân’s concern not only with spiritual matters but also with many seemingly trivial, mundane aspects of life; but in time he began to understand that if man were indeed an integral unity of body and soul – as Islam insisted he was – no aspect of his life could be too ‘trivial’ to come within the purview of religion. With all this, the Qur’ân never let its followers forget that the life of this world was only one stage of man’s way to a higher existence, and that his ultimate goal was of a spiritual nature. Material prosperity, it said, is desirable but not as an end in itself: and therefore man’s appetites, though justified in themselves, must be restrained and controlled by moral consciousness. This consciousness ought to relate not only to man’s relationship with God but also to his relations with men; not only to the spiritual perfection of the individual but also to the creation of such social conditions as might be conducive to the spiritual development of all, so that all might live in fullness.

Leopold saw all this as intellectually and ethically far more ‘respectable’ than anything he had previously heard or read about Islam. Its approach to the problems of the spirit seemed to be deeper than that



of the Old Testament and had, moreover, none of the latter's predilection for one particular nation; and its approach to the problems of the flesh was, unlike the New Testament, strongly affirmative. Spirit and flesh stood, each in its own right, as the twin aspects of man's God-created life.

Was not perhaps this teaching, he asked himself, responsible for the emotional security he had so long sensed in the Arabs?

After his departure from Syria, he spent a few months in Turkey on his way back to Europe and in this way his first journey to the Muslim world came to an end.

He would later reflect upon this time: "As I sat in the train that was taking me from Trieste to Vienna, my recent impressions of Turkey began to lose all their vividness and the only reality that remained was the eighteen months I had spent in Arab countries. It almost gave me a shock to realize that I was looking upon the once so familiar European scenery with the eyes of a stranger. The people seemed so ugly, their movements angular and clumsy, with no direct relationship to what they really felt or wanted: and all at once I knew that in spite of the outward appearance of purpose in all they did, they were living, without being aware of it, in a world of make-believe... Obviously, my contact with the Arabs had utterly, irretrievably changed my approach to what I considered essential in life; and it was with something like astonishment that I remembered that other Europeans had experienced Arabian life before me; how was it possible, then, that they had not experienced the same shock of discovery? Or – had they? Had perhaps one or another of them been as shaken to the depths as I was now?"

He stopped for a few weeks in Vienna and celebrated a reconciliation with his father who had gotten over his anger at his son's abandonment of his university studies and the unceremonious manner in which he had left home. After all, Leopold was now a correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* – a name that people in Central Europe used to pronounce almost with awe in those days – and had thus justified his boastful claim that he would come out on top.

From Vienna he proceeded straight to Frankfurt to present himself in person to the newspaper for which he had been writing for well over a year. He did this with a great deal of self-assurance, for the letters from Frankfurt had made it evident that his work was appreciated.

To be a member of an organization like the *Frankfurter Zeitung* was very gratifying to a man of his age; the more so as his hesitant views about the Middle East were met with serious attention by the editors and often became the subject of the daily editorial conferences; and the final

triumph came on the day when he was asked to write an editorial on a current Middle East problem.

His work at the *Frankfurter Zeitung* gave a strong impetus to his conscious thinking. With greater clarity than ever, he began to relate his Eastern experiences to the Western world of which he was once again a part. Just as some months earlier he had discovered a connection between the emotional security of the Arabs and the faith they professed, it now began to dawn upon him that Europe's lack of inner integration and the chaotic state of its ethics might be an outcome of its loss of contact with the religious faith that had shaped Western civilization. While Western society did not expressly deny God, it simply no longer had room for Him in its intellectual system.

After returning to Europe, he was beset by a feeling of discontent, the feeling of one who had been forced to halt right before arriving at a great discovery that would remove the veil from his eyes if only he were given a little more time.

Leopold wanted to return to the East once more. His wish was fulfilled when the paper's editor-in-chief, the world-famous Dr. Heinrich Simon, seeing him as a promising newspaper correspondent, readily agreed to let him.

He returned to spend two years in the Middle East, visiting Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. He returned from Europe with a new perspective on the Western world that grew in clarity as the days progressed. He described this perspective as follows:

"Western man has truly given himself up to the worship of the *Dajjal*. He has long ago lost all innocence, all inner integration with nature. Life has become a puzzle to him. In order not to perish in this loneliness, he must endeavor to dominate life by outward means. The fact of being alive can, by itself, no longer give him inner security: he must always wrestle for it, with pain, from moment to new moment. Because he has lost all metaphysical orientation, and has decided to do without it, he must continuously invent for himself mechanical allies: and thus the furious, desperate drive of his technique. He invents every day new machines and gives each of them something of his soul to make them fight for his existence. That they do indeed; but at the same time they create for him ever new needs, new dangers, new fears – and an unquenchable thirst for newer, yet artificial allies. His soul loses itself in the ever bolder, ever more fantastic, ever more powerful wheelwork of the creative machine: and the machine loses its true purpose – to be a protector and enricher of human life – and evolves into a deity in its own right, a devouring Moloch of steel. The priests and preachers of this insatiable deity do not seem to be aware that the rapidity of modern

technical progress is a result not only of a positive growth of knowledge but also of spiritual despair, and that the grand material achievements in the light of which Western man proclaims his will to attain to mastery over nature are, in their innermost, of a defensive character: behind their shining façades lurks the fear of the Unknown.

“Western civilization has not been able to strike a harmonious balance between man’s bodily and social needs and his spiritual cravings; it has abandoned its erstwhile religious ethics without being able to produce out of itself any other moral system, however theoretical, that would commend itself to reason. Despite all of its advances in education, it has not been able to overcome man’s stupid readiness to fall prey to any slogan, however absurd, which clever demagogues think fit to invent. It has raised the technique of ‘organization’ to a fine art – and nevertheless the nations of the West daily demonstrate their utter inability to control the forces which their scientists have brought into being, and have now reached a stage where apparently unbounded scientific possibilities go hand in hand with world-wide chaos. Lacking all truly religious orientation, the Westerner cannot morally benefit by the light of the knowledge which his – undoubtedly great – science is shedding...

“And yet, in the arrogance of their blindness, the people of the West are convinced that it is *their* civilization that will bring light and happiness to the world... the belief that all human problems can be solved in factories, laboratories and on the desks of statisticians.

“And thus the *Dajjal* has come into his own...”

During his second trip to the Middle East, Leopold acquired a fluency in Arabic. Instead of looking at Islam through the eyes of orientalists and non-Muslim translators, he was able to look directly into its cultural legacy. He was no longer certain of his former belief that a European could never consciously grasp the total picture of the Muslim mind. It occurred to him that if one was able to achieve a certain degree of detachment from his own past habits of thought and allow for the possibility that they might not be the only valid ones, the once so strange Muslim world might indeed be graspable. His understanding of Islam grew during this second journey to the Muslim world in which he was afforded the opportunity to mix with people of various nations, engage in discussions with scholars, and meet with kings and rulers.

“Thinking back to those days of my second Middle East journey – when Islam began to occupy my mind in all earnest – it seems to me that even then I was conscious of pursuing a journey of discovery. Every day new impressions broke over me; every day new questions arose from within and new answers came from without. They awakened an echo of something that had been hidden somewhere in the background of my

mind; and as I progressed in my knowledge of Islam I felt, time and time again, that a truth I had always known, without being aware of it, was gradually being uncovered and, as it were, confirmed.”

A certainty began to develop within him, as he grew in his understanding of Muslim life and of Islam, that he was at last arriving at the answers to all of his questions. “Nothing in the whole world – neither the most perfect automobile nor the proudest bridge nor the most thoughtful book – can replace this grace which has been lost in the West and is already threatened in the East – this grace which is nothing but an expression of the magic consonance between a human being’s Self and the world that surrounds him.”

With this tolerant spirit towards others, Leopold was easily able to overcome the Western man’s misapprehension of Islam that almost inevitably results when he witnesses the tangible evidence of a Muslim world in decay.

The popular, Western view about Islam was that the downfall of the Muslims was mainly due to Islam; and, consequently, the sooner the Muslim peoples were freed from their subservience to Islamic beliefs and social practices and induced to adopt the Western way of life, the better for them and the rest of the world.

Leopold’s own observations, however, had convinced him that the mind of the average Westerner had an utterly distorted image of Islam. “It became obvious to me that the decline of the Muslims was not due to any shortcomings in Islam but rather in their own failure to live up to it. For indeed it was Islam that had carried the early Muslims to tremendous cultural heights.

“In short, Islam gave a tremendous incentive to cultural achievements which constitute one of the proudest pages in the history of mankind; and it gave this incentive by saying Yes to the intellect and No to obscurantism, Yes to action and No to quietism, Yes to life and No to asceticism. Little wonder, then, that as soon as it emerged beyond the confines of Arabia, Islam won new adherents by leaps and bounds. Born and nurtured in the world-concept of Pauline and Augustinian Christianity, the populations of Syrian and North Africa, and a little later of Visigothic Spain, saw themselves suddenly confronted with a teaching which denied the dogma of Original Sin and stressed the inborn dignity of earthly life: and so they rallied in ever-increasing numbers to the new creed that gave them to understand that man was God’s vicar on earth. This, and not a legendary conversion at the point of a sword’, was the explanation of Islam’s amazing triumph in the glorious morning of its history.

“It was not the Muslims that had made Islam great: it was Islam

that had made the Muslims great. But as soon as their faith became habit and ceased to be a programme of life, to be consciously pursued, the creative impulse that underlay their civilization waned and gradually gave way to indolence, sterility and cultural decay.”

Leopold’s keen intellect and insightfulness allowed him to plum the depths of the Muslims’ intellectual heritage and appreciate it for what it really was. “An integrated image of Islam was now emerging with a finality, a decisiveness that sometimes astounded me. It was taking shape by a process that could almost be described as a kind of mental osmosis – that is, without any conscious effort on my part to piece together and ‘systematize’ the many fragments of knowledge that had come my way during the past four years. I saw before me something like a perfect work of architecture, with all its elements harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other, with nothing superfluous and nothing lacking – a balance and composure which gave one the feeling that everything in the outlook and postulates of Islam was ‘in its proper place’.”

“The most important feature of that new civilization – a feature which set it entirely apart from all other movements in human history – was the fact that it had been conceived in terms of, and arose from, a voluntary agreement of the people concerned. Here, social progress was not, as in all other communities and civilizations known to history, a result of pressure and counterpressure of conflicting interests, but part and parcel of an original ‘constitution’. In other words, a genuine social contract lay at the root of things: not as a figure of speech formulated by later generations of power-holders in defense of their privileges, but as the real historic source of Islamic civilization. The Qur’ân said: *Behold, God has bought of the Faithful their persons and their possessions, offering the Paradise in return...Rejoice then on the bargain you have made, for this is the triumph supreme.*

“I knew that this ‘triumph supreme’ – this one instance of a real social contract recorded by history – was realized only during a very short period; or, rather, only during a very short period was a large-scale attempt made to realize it. Less than a century after the Prophet’s death, the political form of pristine Islam began to be corrupted and, in the following centuries, the original programme was gradually pushed into the background. Clannish wranglings for power took the place of a free agreement of free men and women; hereditary kingship, as inimical to the political concept of Islam as polytheism is to its theological concept, soon came into being – and with it, dynastic struggles and intrigues, tribal preferences and oppressions, and the usual degradation of religion to the status of a handmaiden of political power: in short, the entire host of ‘vested interests’ so well known to history. For a time, the great thinkers of Islam tried to keep its true ideology aloft and pure: but those who came



after them were of lesser stature and lapsed after two or three centuries into a morass of intellectual convention, ceased to think for themselves and became content to repeat the dead phrases of earlier generations – forgetting that every human opinion is time-bound and fallible and therefore in need of eternal renewal. The original impetus of Islam, so tremendous in its beginnings, sufficed for a while to carry the Muslim commonwealth to great cultural heights – to that splendid vision of scientific, literary and artistic achievement which historians describe as the Golden Age of Islam; but within a few more centuries this impetus also died down for want of spiritual nourishment, and Muslim civilization became more and more stagnant and devoid of creative power.

“I had no illusions as to the present state of affairs in the Muslim world. The four years I had spent in those countries had shown me that while Islam was still alive, perceptible in the world-view of its adherents and in their silent admission of its ethical premises, they themselves were like people paralyzed, unable to translate their beliefs into fruitful action. But what concerned me more than the failure of present-day Muslims to implement the schemes of Islam were the potentialities of that scheme itself. It was sufficient for me to know that for a short time, quite at the beginning of Islamic history, a successful attempt *had* been made to translate that scheme into practice; and what had seemed possible at one time might perhaps become really possible at another. What did it matter that they did not live up to the ideal placed before them by the Arabian Prophet thirteen centuries ago – if the ideal itself still lay open to all who were willing to listen to the message?

“And it might well be, I thought, that we latecomers needed that message even more desperately than did the people of Muhammad’s time. They lived in an environment much simpler than ours, and so their problems and difficulties had been much easier of solution. The world in which I was living – the whole of it – was wobbling because of the absence of any agreement as to what is good and evil spiritually and, therefore, socially and economically as well...More than any previous time, I felt with mounting certainty, this time of ours was in need of an ideological basis for a new social contract: it needed a faith that would make us understand the hollowness of material progress for the sake of progress alone –and nevertheless would give the life of this world its due; that would show us how to strike a balance between our spiritual and physical requirements: and thus save us from the disaster into which we were rushing headlong.

“It would not be too much to say that at this period of my life the problem of Islam – for it was a problem to me – occupied my mind to the exclusion of everything else. By now my absorption had outgrown its initial stages, when it had been no more than an intellectual interest in a strange, if attractive, ideology and culture: it had become a passionate

search for the truth.”

Leopold had become able to distinguish between what was really from Islam and what was foreign to it in the various concepts and behaviors that he encountered in the Muslim world. During his first trip to the East, he witnessed a Sufi ceremony in a little mosque in Scutari, Turkey which he described as follows: “As if with one movement the dervishes rose, threw off their cloaks and stood in their white, flowing tunics which reached to the ankles and were belted at the waists with knotted scarves. Then each of them made a half-turn, so that, standing in a circle, they faced one another in pairs; whereupon they crossed their arms over the chest and bowed deeply before one another...The next moment all the dervishes stretched their arms sideways, the right palm turned upward and the left downward. Like a whispered chant, the word *Huwa* – ‘He’ (that is, God) – came from their lips. With this softly breathed sound on his lips, each man began to turn slowly on his axis, swaying in rhythm with the music that seemed to come from a great distance. They threw back their heads, closed their eyes, and a smooth rigidity spread over their faces. Faster and faster became the circling movement; the voluminous tunics rose and formed wide circles around the spinning figures, making them resemble white, swirling eddies in a sea; deep was the absorption in their faces...The circling grew into a whirling rotation, an intoxication and ecstasy rose visibly in all the men. In countless repetition their half-open lips murmured the word, *Huwa*...”

During his second journey, during an illness, he recalled that ceremony and made the following observations about it: “My recent fever-borne remembrance of the whirling dervishes of Scutari somehow bothered me. It had unexpectedly acquired a puzzling significance that had not been apparent in the original experience. The esoteric rites of this religious order – one of the many I had encountered in various Muslim countries – did not seem to fit into the picture of Islam that was slowly forming in my mind...and through (my readings), my instinctive suspicion that esoterism of this kind had intruded into the Muslim orbit from non-Islamic sources was confirmed. The speculations of the *sufis*, as the Muslim mystics were called, betrayed Gnostic, Indian and occasionally even Christian influences which had brought in ascetic concepts and practices entirely alien to the message of the Arabian Prophet. In his message, *reason* was stressed as the only real way to faith. While the validity of mystical experience was not necessarily precluded in this approach, Islam was primarily an intellectual and not an emotional proposition. Although, naturally enough, it produced a strong emotional attachment in its followers, Muhammad’s teaching did not accord to emotion as such any independent role in religious *perceptions*: for emotions, however profound, are far more liable to be swayed by subjective desires and fears than reason, with all its fallibility, ever could be.”

Leopold first realized that Islam might be his goal during his second journey to the East, when, on a winter day in Afghanistan, someone told him: “But thou art a Muslim, only thou dost not know it thyself.”

He had been on his way to Herat and had stopped in the village of Deh-Zangi. On the evening of his second day there, he sat down to an opulent dinner at the home of the district governor. Afterwards, a man from the village entertained them with ballads of David’s fight with Goliath – of the fight of faith against brute power. When the ballad ended, the governor remarked: “David was small, but his faith was great...”

Leopold could not prevent himself from adding: “And you are many but your faith is small.”

His host looked at him with astonishment, and, embarrassed by what he had almost involuntarily said, Leopold rapidly began to explain himself. His explanation took the shape of a torrent of questions:

“How has it come about that you Muslims have lost your self-confidence – that self-confidence which once enabled you to spread your faith, in less than a hundred years, from Arabia westward as far as the Atlantic and eastward deep into China – and now surrender yourselves so easily, so weakly, to the thoughts and customs of the West? Why can’t you, whose forefathers illuminated the world with science and art at a time when Europe lay in deep barbarism and ignorance, summon forth the courage to go back to your own progressive, radiant faith? How is it that Atatürk, that petty masquerader who denies all value to Islam has become to you Muslims a symbol of ‘Muslim revival’?”

His host remained speechless. It had started to snow outside. Leopold felt acutely the glory that had been and the shame that was enveloping these late sons of a great civilization. He continued: “Tell me – how has it come about that the faith of your Prophet and all its clearness and simplicity has been buried beneath a rubble of sterile speculation and the hair-splitting of your scholastics? How has it happened that your princes and great landowners revel in wealth and luxury while so many of their Muslim brethren subsist in unspeakable poverty and squalor – although your Prophet taught that *No one may call himself a Faithful who eats his fill while his neighbor remains hungry?* Can you make me understand why you have brushed women into the background of your lives – although the women around the Prophet and his Companions took part in so grand a manner in the life of their men? How has it come about that so many of you Muslims are ignorant and so few can even read and write – although your Prophet declared that *Striving after knowledge is a most sacred duty for every Muslim man and woman* and that *The superiority of the learned man over the mere pious*

*is like the superiority of the moon when it is full over the stars?"*

Still Leopold's host stared at him without speaking, and he began to feel that his outburst had offended him. In the end, the governor pulled his wide yellow sheepskin cloak closer around himself, as if feeling cold; then he whispered: "But – you are a Muslim..."

Leopold laughed, and replied: "No, I am not a Muslim, but I have come to see so much beauty in Islam that it makes me sometimes angry to watch you people waste it...Forgive me if I have spoken harshly. I did not speak as an enemy."

But my host shook his head: "No, it is as I have said: you are a Muslim, only you don't know it yourself...Why don't you say, now and here, 'There is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet' and become a Muslim in fact, as you already are in your heart?"

Leopold replied: "If I ever do say it, it will be because my mind has been set at rest."

"But," he insisted, "you already know far more about Islam than most of us; what *is* it that you have not yet understood?"

Leopold replied: "It is not a question of understanding. It is rather a question of being convinced: convinced that the Qur'ân is really the word of God and not merely the brilliant creation of a great human mind."

But the words of his Afghan friend never really left him in the months that followed.

A few months after that encounter, Leopold would profess his acceptance of Islam in front of the small Muslim community in Berlin.

After returning from his two years of travel throughout the Muslim world, Leopold found that in his absence his name had become famous. He was now considered one of the most outstanding correspondents in Central Europe.

Some of his articles had come to the attention of prominent orientalist scholars and received a more than passing recognition. On the strength of this achievement, he was invited to deliver a series of lectures at the Academy of Geopolitics in Berlin – where he was told that it had never happened before that a man of his age (he was not yet twenty-six) had been accorded such a distinction. Other articles of more general interest had been reproduced, with the permission of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, by many other newspapers; one article had been reprinted nearly thirty times.

After his return, he tried to resume his relationships with his old literary friends in Berlin. However, they had grown estranged. They no longer spoke the same intellectual language. In particular, from none of his friends could he elicit anything like understanding for his preoccupation with Islam. Most of them were of the opinion that the old religions were a thing of the past, and that our time demanded a new, 'humanistic' approach. But even those who did not so sweepingly deny all validity to institutional religion were by no means disposed to give up the popular Western notion that Islam, being overly concerned with mundane matters, lacked the 'mystique' which one had a right to expect from religion.

He would later comment: "It rather surprised me to discover that the very aspect of Islam which had attracted me in the first instance – the absence of a division of reality into the physical and spiritual compartments and the stress on reason as a way to faith – appealed so little to intellectuals who otherwise were wont to claim for reason a dominant role in life: it was in the religious sphere alone that they instinctively receded from their habitually so 'rational' and 'realistic' position. And in this respect I could discern no difference whatever between those few of my friends who were religiously inclined and the many to whom religion had ceased to be more than an outmoded convention.

"In time, however, I came to understand where their difficulty lay. I began to perceive that in the eyes of people brought up within the orbit of Christian thought – with its stress on the 'supernatural' allegedly inherent in every truly religious experience – a predominantly rational approach appeared to distract from a religion's spiritual value. This attitude was by no means confined to believing Christians. Because of Europe's long, almost exclusive association with Christianity, even the agnostic European had subconsciously learned to look upon all religious experience through the lens of Christian concepts, and would regard it as 'valid' only if it was accompanied by a thrill of numinous awe before things hidden and beyond intellectual comprehension. Islam did not fulfill this requirement: it insisted on a co-ordination of the physical and spiritual aspects of life on a perfectly natural plane."

As for himself, Leopold knew that he was being driven to Islam but a last hesitancy made him postpone the final, irrevocable step. "The thought of embracing Islam was like the prospect of venturing out onto a bridge that spanned an abyss between two different worlds: a bridge so long that one would have to reach the point of no return before the other end became visible. I was well aware that if I became a Muslim I would have to cut myself off from the world in which I had grown up. No other outcome was possible. One could not really follow the call of Muhammad and still maintain one's inner links with a society that was ruled by diametrically opposed concepts. But – *was Islam truly a message from*



*God or merely the wisdom of a great, but fallible, man...?"*

It did not take long for Leopold to get his answer. He had resumed his life in the West and saw the degree of unhappiness and pain that the Western people were suffering though they seemed nevertheless to be quite unaware of it. Once, while traveling by train, he started to observe the people around him. "I began to look around at the other faces in the compartment – faces belonging without exception to well-dressed well-fed people: and in almost every one of them I could discern an expression of hidden suffering, so hidden that the owner of the face seemed quite unaware of it."

He pondered over whether they knew themselves what was going on within them and came to the conclusion: "I knew that they did not – for otherwise they could not go on wasting their lives as they did, without any faith in binding truths, without any goal beyond the desire to raise their own 'standard of living', without any hopes other than having more material amenities, more gadgets, and perhaps more power..."

When he returned home, he happened to glance at his desk on which lay an open copy of the Qur'ân he had been reading earlier. Mechanically, he picked the book up to put it away, but just as he was about to close it, his eye fell on the open page before him and he read, with the experience of the train still fresh in his mind:

*You are obsessed by greed for more and more  
Until you go down to your graves.  
Nay, but you will  
come to know!  
Nay, but you will  
come to know!  
Nay, if you but knew it with the knowledge of certainty,  
You would indeed see the hell you are in.  
In time, indeed, you shall see it with the eye of certainty:  
And on that Day you will be asked what you have done with  
the boon of  
life.*

"For a moment I was speechless. I think the book shook in my hands...it was an answer: an answer so decisive that all doubt was suddenly at an end. I knew now, beyond a doubt, that it was a God-inspired book I was holding in my hand."

Six years after accepting Islam, he was crossing the great desert at the Iraqi-Saudi border intent upon the pilgrimage to Mecca. His long journey had been rich with adventure, and excitement, and fraught with death-defying danger.

In his autobiography *The Road to Mecca* he writes about that long journey in gripping detail. He also writes of his other journey – his spiritual journey to Mecca, to Islam.